

PROSPECT: OR, VIEW OF THE MORAL WORLD.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 12, 1805.

NO. 2.

Extract from a Theological Discourse, delivered in this City, by the Editor, on Sunday evening, the 6th instant.

Exclamation of Jesus upon the Cross.

SMALL circumstances, or facts of a trifling nature, sometimes unfold the true character of a great and influential system. In the present case, the book called the Bible, has placed before the contemplative mind a certain criterion, on which the judgment may rest with safety. The dying, the agonizing Jesus, stretched upon a cross to atone for the sins of a wicked and apostate world, exclaims in his last moments, *My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?* An exclamation of this sort, coming from the pretended Saviour of man, furnishes a clear solution of all the mysterious difficulties of the Christian religion. This divine, this immaculate system, sent from the celestial world for the ultimate salvation of the human race, was, according to the system-makers themselves, regulated and agreed upon by the contracting parties; on the part of Jehovah, proposition is made, and a stipulation offered, which is accepted by his son, Jesus. The first declares the world to be in a lost and miserable condition, and that religious reclamation can be had only through the interference and suffering of him who is the brightness of his father's glory, and sole heir of all things in the present and future world; on the part of Jesus, these conditions are accepted, and he sets out upon this extraordinary embassy, with an ardent zeal, and missionary fanaticism, unequalled in ancient or modern times. No wonder the object was vast and important—an intelligent world, originally pure, but now labouring under the shameful degradations of iniquitous apostacy, was to be brought back to the fountain of excellence, and restored to the favour of the Most High! leaving divinity or celestial impulses out of the question. An undertaking so dignified and benevolent, would have fired the breast, even of mortal man, with an unbroken spirit, and led him on to certain acquisition of immortal glory. Not so the chosen messenger of heaven! he hesitates, he falters, he rescinds his resolution—he exclaims, at last, in the very anguish of his soul, *My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?*—Here is, on the face of the record, an implied charge of the basest injustice against Jehovah himself! he had not forsaken him; he had acted according to contract, and in strict conformity to the original design of both parties. This scene of suffering, this murder of innocence, was held to be essential, and more than this was considered as the only means of restoring a lost world to Divine perfection. How then could two Divine beings, both equal and both infinite, in the estimation of Christian believers, be so dreadfully deceived in regard to confidence, character, and perseverance? The reciprocation of ideas which must have passed between the Father and the Son anterior to the crucifixion, precludes all propriety of indulging an opinion of this kind. There was no deception, every thing was well understood, and

the exclamation of Jesus, in the present case, disgraces Jesus, and does no honour to his Father. Any sound and philosophic mind, would have acted with more fortitude upon any important occasion, where a great object was to be obtained. Divinity, in this case, dwindles below Philosophy, and the celestial origin of the Christian scheme becomes, in the view of reason, disgustingly contemptible. Let a case be supposed, in which an individual should become a voluntary victim of his country's safety, and that his life should be sacrificed for the accomplishment of an object so important! In what point of light should we look upon such a man, if, at the last hour of difficulty and of death, he should exclaim—My country, my country, why hast thou forsaken me? Would not reason and justice stamp upon his character the mark of cowardice and imbecility? In such a case, he would have forfeited all claim to fortitude, and become the scorn and contempt of the whole earth. Philosophy blushes at the shameful infirmities of the Christian religion, and presents the dying Socrates triumphantly superior to the timid and retracting son of Jehovah! Let believers no longer boast that their religion inspires a contempt of death—the son of God himself receded in his last moments and died destitute of the firmness and fortitude of a Philosopher.

CHRISTIANITY AND DEISM.

THE charges which revealed religion has brought against those who dare call in question the celestial origin of that religion are numerous, and mingled with malignant severity. Pious fanaticism ought to reflect for a moment, before she presumes to deal damnation round the land in a manner so liberal, and to place such awful marks of condemnation upon her antagonists. What is infidelity? It is a disbelief in regard to matters contained in the Old and New Testament; in Turkey, it is renouncing the Koran of Mahomet; in Persia, a denial of the sacred origin of the Sadir and the Zendavesta; in all other countries, in like manner, refusing to accede to the books and doctrines of the most numerous and powerful party, engaged in the cause of religious fanaticism, and the holy work of passing upon their fellow-creatures temporal censures and eternal damnation. How perverse, polluted, and prejudiced must be that man's mind, who does not see, in these conflicting opinions and systems, the basest folly, and the most detestable injustice! Who gave to the people of Asia or of Europe the right of forming opinions or establishing creeds for the people of America? Who gave to any one sectary the right of imposing its dogmas upon another? Who gave to any individual of the human race, a right of thinking and judging, which does not apply to the whole species! Presumptuous man, wild and fanatic mortals of the earth, when will you cease to exhibit religious tyranny as a prominent feature of your character? When will justice and humanity compel you to the faithful performance of a sacred duty—that of giving to your fellow-beings the rights you enjoy, and exercise yourselves? Christianity is made up of persecution; it proscribes, it damns, it burns in hell forever! Deism believes in one God, and the practice of exalted virtue; it abhors persecution; it gives to the energy of thought an unqualified operation; it delights in peace—and, if universally embraced, would banish religious wars from the earth.

FOR THE PROSPECT.

Who will deny the divine source of reason, or declare it a human duty to nip it in the bud? A stronger ground of objection to what is called revealed religion, can hardly be offered, than the conversations that pass between children and their instructors, when the sublime mysteries of this religion are first presented to their notice. It is within the knowledge of perhaps nine-tenths of those Christian believers who have performed the respective parts of child and parent, that the unlettered and uninstructed reason of an infant will, by simple and artless enquiries, often raise objections to this divine revelation, which its ablest advocates find themselves unable to solve. It is also well known, that children are, in general, predisposed to pay due deference and respect to the information and experience of their superiors; instances to the contrary, are but few. If, then, an infant, in the innocence and simplicity of its heart, reposes, generally, its full confidence in the communications of a superior, how comes it that in this superlatively important concern, the magnitude of which is enforced by more than usual solemnity on the part of the instructor, how comes it, that on such an occasion, above all others, the germ of mental independence shall appear, and the child, by a sudden impulse, discover a spirit of enquiry, bordering, as it were, on suspicion? And how comes it, too, that the advocates of a religion, which is to shine more and more unto the perfect day, instead of giving credit to sentiments which proceed from no sarcastic disposition, but are uttered in the honest spirit of enquiry, that the advocates of such a luminous religion should suddenly check these effusions of innocence, by frowningly testifying their displeasure, and denounce a punishment upon their repetition? Is this a mode of instruction fitted to produce conviction? Is it by such means, that the infant mind is to be impressed with the benevolence of the Creator? Or, does the conduct of either party, in such a scene, speak in favour of a revelation which is to be thus enforced? The bigot will pronounce this an early symptom of the waywardness of our nature, which must be checked, for the salvation of the little sinner, and the glory of its Creator. The philosopher will answer, that it is a sudden effort of reason, in its feeblest stages, to stem the torrent which is about to overwhelm it. In conveying to youth a knowledge of astronomy, geography, and other useful branches of science, no enquiries of the learner are either feared or discouraged; they are, on the contrary, grateful to the teacher, who, besides thereby relaxing the fatigues of his office, becomes better acquainted with the progress and improvement of his scholar. Enquiries are not only useful, but necessary; they open new channels for information, and enable the instructor so to familiarize and explain, that his instructions are given and received with increased profit and delight. What, then, can we think of a religion which shrinks from the ordeal of examination? In the various departments of philosophy and science, a free and unrestrained investigation of their divine principles, tends more and more to establish and confirm their excellence and utility. Can divinity, then, belong to a religion that skulks from the enquiries of a child? It is not contended that Christian parents, by inculcating their peculiar tenets, deliberately intend an injury to their offspring—most of them have been themselves terrified in youth, and for want of independent reflection, as dis-

cretion ripens, are apprehensive for their children's fate. But will any parent deny that, from this inexperienced source, strong and serious objections do frequently proceed? And, can it be believed, that a God of truth will send a lying spirit into the heart of an infant? If it be contended that these objections of children arise only from the incapacity to comprehend, which is incident to their years, then it becomes a question, why instruction is to be thus forced upon them **out of season**? Their advancement in the science cannot be thereby accelerated, for a divine revelation could not, like a mere human invention, require time, and laborious investigation, to display its principles. Is it fair, then, is it manly or honourable, as soon as reason begins to dawn, instead of encouraging and promoting its activity, thus instantly to put it in irons, and annex, even to an effort to escape, the penalties of treason? Is there so little confidence in the internal purity of a divine religion, that its evidence cannot be confided to the unbiased understanding of an adult, but its defenders must be pressed to the service, before its nature is known, and while they possess not the means of resistance. It is evidently so. The conduct of Christian professors is a striking proof of their conviction, that, if children were left to the unprejudiced exercise of those mental powers which God has bestowed upon them, all schemes of religion, claiming supernatural origin, would speedily fall without opposition. Yes—shamefully as reason has been trammeled, its divine principle still preserves it unstrangled, and will cause it to rise superior to every artifice.

RELIGIOUS INSANITY.

The following was communicated to the Editor of the Virginia Argus, by a gentleman at Abington, in the state of Virginia.

THE JERKS.

THE Camp Meetings in the Western states, have been productive of some phenomena, which have not been satisfactorily explained, and some of which are becoming very interesting.

Persons who have been greatly affected at those meetings, have been exercised in various ways. They laugh, they sing, they dance; and as it would appear, all this is involuntarily done, being what the preachers call "religious exercises;" but it is doubtful whether these extravagancies are not the offspring of free will.

There is one species of these "religious exercises" which are certainly involuntary, and they have spread from the camp and other religious meetings, in an alarming manner. These are called "the jerks." Some of those affected with this disorder will rise up, and with their eyes fixed and starting, make their feet roll on the floor, as sticks upon a drum. But generally, the person who has this disorder, is vexed with a perpetual convulsive jerking in all his limbs. I have been told some of them will vault like Sully, and appear as if they would dash themselves to pieces, if not prevented. I have seen but one man affected with this disorder—there were not five seconds of time during which some of his limbs, his neck, or his spine, were not drawn with a sudden jerk, in one direction or another.

Yesterday there was in this town a muster of some militia companies. Three or four of these jerkers were in town, and no sooner did

the drums begin to beat, than they found themselves so violently jerked, that they were forced to run out of town with all practicable speed.

Several persons have taken this disorder who have no religion at all. Sucking children are not exempt from it, as I have been informed.

A wild young man of this place, either from seeing the jerkers, or from shaking hands with them, took the disorder yesterday with great violence. A young man of the country who had this disorder on him, came into town to see his sister, who was free from it—she took the disorder immediately.

It therefore seems the jerks are a nervous disease, produced by horror, very strongly excited.

I think this subject not unworthy of the public consideration. I submit its cause to philosophers, its remedy to physicians.

Abington, 14th October.

A SUBSCRIBER.

REMARKS ON THE ABOVE.

THE imagination is a curious and unruly property of human existence; its movements are vastly irregular—its operations border upon insanity. Religious fanaticism, above every thing else, is calculated to set on fire the imagination, and destroy all the harmonious co-operation of the human powers, both physical and moral. Strong minds, of sane and regular texture, are seldom disturbed with nonentities; but with minds of inferior energy, all the gods, ghosts, and angels of antiquity, produce a powerful influence. Disorders of the imagination, are also of a contagious or transferable nature. When one man, with all the horrors of hell before him, and these horrors united with an angry God, and a vindictive devil, depicts the terrific scene to his companions, they all take the alarm, they all catch fire at once; they reciprocate with each other the sensations of terror, and both body and mind are placed in a most dreadful state of distortion. This theory is corroborated by the actual observation of enlightened men in every country, where religious fanaticism has unfolded its baneful character. Let us hear no more, then, of these jerkers being influenced by the spirit of God; it is more like the spirit of the devil! But the fact is, it does not proceed from either source; it is the effect of a disordered and distracted imagination, reduced to a state of absolute insanity, by terrific views and apprehensions of futurity. Ignorance is the parent of fear; it is the business of knowledge to restore man to a correct use of his senses and of his understanding.

CALVINISTIC DIVINITY.

WHAT strange ideas, says he, would an Indian or a Chinese philosopher have of our holy religion, if they judged by the schemes given of it by our modern free-thinkers, and Pharisaical doctors of all sects? According to the odious and too vulgar systems of these incredulous scoffers, and credulous scribblers, the God of the Jews is a most cruel, unjust, partial, and fantastical being. He created about 6000 years ago a man and a woman, and placed them in a fine garden in Asia, of which there are no remains. This garden was furnished with all sorts of trees, fountains, and flowers. He allowed them the use of all the fruits of this beautiful garden except of one, that was planted in the midst

thereof, and that had in it a secret virtue of preserving them in continual health, and vigour of body and mind, of exalting their natural powers, and making them wise. The devil entered into the body of a serpent, and solicited the first woman to eat of this forbidden fruit; she engaged her husband to do the same. To punish this slight curiosity and natural desire of life and knowledge, God not only threw our first parents out of Paradise, but he condemned all their posterity to temporal misery, and the greatest part of them to eternal pains, though the souls of these innocent children have no more relation to that of Adam than to those of Nero and Mahomet; since, according to the scholastic drivellers, fabulists, and mythologists, all souls are created pure, and infused immediately into mortal bodies as soon as the *fœtus* is formed. To accomplish the barbarous partial decree of predestination and reprobation, God abandoned all nations to darkness, idolatry, and superstition, without any saving knowledge or salutary graces; unless it was one particular nation, whom he chose as his peculiar people. This chosen nation was, however, the most stupid, ungrateful, rebellious, and perfidious of all nations. After God had thus kept the far greater part of all the human species, during near 4000 years, in a reprobate state, he changed all of a sudden, and took a fancy for other nations beside the Jews. Then he sent his only begotten Son to the world, under a human form, to appease his wrath, satisfy his vindictive justice, and die for the pardon of sin. Very few nations, however, have heard of this gospel; and all the rest, though left in invincible ignorance, are damned without exception or any possibility of remission. The greatest part of those who have heard of it, have changed only some speculative notions about God, and some external forms in worship: for in all other respects the bulk of Christians have continued as corrupt as the rest of mankind in their morals; yea, so much the more perverse and criminal as their lights were greater. Unless it be a very small select number, all other Christians, like the Pagans, will be for ever damned; the great sacrifice offered up for them will become void and of no effect: God will take delight for ever in their torments and blasphemies; and though he can by one *fiat* change their hearts, yet they will remain for ever unconverted and unconvertible, because he will be for ever unappeased and irreconcileable. It is true, that all this makes God odious; a hater of souls, rather than a lover of them; a cruel, vindictive tyrant, an impotent or a wrathful demon, rather than an all-powerful, beneficent father of spirits: yet all this is a mystery. He has secret reasons for his conduct that are impenetrable; and though he appears unjust and barbarous, yet we must believe the contrary, because what is injustice, crime, cruelty, and the blackest malice in us, is in him justice, mercy, and sovereign goodness. Thus the incredulous free-thinkers, the Judaizing Christians, and the fatalistic doctors, have disfigured and dishonoured the sublime mysteries of our holy faith; thus they have confounded the nature of good and evil, transformed the most monstrous passions into divine attributes, and surpassed the Pagans in blasphemy, by ascribing to the Eternal Nature, as perfections, what makes the most horrid crimes amongst men. The grosser Pagans contented themselves with divinizing lust, incest, and adultery; but the predestination doctors have divinized cruelty, wrath, fury, vengeance, and all the blackest vices.

RAMSAY.

THE MYSTERIES OF CERES ELEUSINA.

In the chaos of popular superstition, which would have made almost the whole globe one vast den of ferocious animals, there was a salutary institution, which prevented one part of the human species from degenerating into an entire state of brutality: this consisted of mysteries and expiations. Philosophers endeavoured to bring men back to reason and morality. Those sages made use of superstition itself to correct its enormous abuses.

The mysteries of Zoroaster are no longer known: we know but little of those of Isis: but we cannot doubt that they foretold the grand system of a future state; for Celsus says to Origines, book 8. “*You boast of believing in eternal punishments; and did not all the mystical ministers preach them to their initiated?*”

God’s unity was the principal dogma of all the mysteries. Apuleius has preserved for us the prayer of the priestesses of Isis: “*The celestial powers serve thee; the universe revolves in thine hand; thy feet trample upon Tartarus; the planets answer to thy voice; the seasons return to thy order; the elements obey thee.*”

The mystical ceremonies of Ceres were in imitation of those of Isis. Those who had committed crimes, confessed them and expiated them; they fasted, purified themselves, and gave alms. All the ceremonies were held sacred by solemn oaths, to make them more venerated. The mysteries were celebrated at night; certain species of tragedies were represented to describe the happiness of the just, and the punishments of the wicked.

Some very learned men have proved, that the sixth book of the Aeneid is only a picture of what was practised in those secret and famous representations. The mysteries of Eleusina became the most celebrated. One very remarkable thing is, that they read the beginning of the theogony of Sanchoniathon the Phœnician. This is a proof that Sanchoniathon had preached one supreme God, the Creator and Governor of the world. It was then that this doctrine was unveiled to the initiated, instructed in the belief of Polytheism. Those who participated of the mysteries, assembled in the temple of Ceres; and the Hierophanta taught them, that instead of adoring Ceres, leading Triptolemus upon a car drawn by dragons, they should adore that God who nourished men, and permitted Ceres and Triptolemus to render agriculture so honourable.

This is true, that the Hierophanta began by reciting the ancient verses of Orpheus. “Walk in the path of justice; adore the sole master of the universe; he is one, he is singly by himself; to him all beings owe their existence; he acts in them, and by them; he sees all, and never was seen by mortal eyes.”

The greatest discretion was necessary, not to shock the prejudices of the multitude. Bishop Warburton observes after Plutarch, that the young Alcibiades having assisted at these mysteries, insulted the statues of Mercury in a party of pleasure, and that the people in their rage insisted upon Alcibiades’ being condemned. Alexander himself having obtained leave in Egypt of the Hierophanta of the mysteries, to acquaint his mother with the secrets of the initiated, at the same time conjured her to burn his letter after reading it, that she might not irritate the Greeks.

Those who have imagined that the mysteries were only infamous debauches, ought to be undeceived by the word which answers to *initiated*; it signifies that they entered on a new life. Not that it is to be doubted that in all these mysteries, the ground work of which was so sensible and useful, many censurable superstitions were introduced. Superstition led to debauchery, which brought on contempt.

But it indubitably appears, that the primary intention of these mysteries was to inspire virtue, from the set form with which the assembly was dismissed. Amongst the Greeks, the two ancient Phœnician words, *koff omphet*, “watch and be pure,” were pronounced. We may produce an additional proof, that the emperor Nero, who was guilty of his mother’s death, could not be admitted to these mysteries when he travelled in Greece: the crime was too enormous; and as great an emperor as he was, the initiated would not receive him amongst them. Zozimus also says, that Constantine could find no Pagan priests who would purify him or absolve him of parricide. According to Tertullian, the ceremony of regeneration was very ridiculous. It was necessary that the initiated should seem to be reborn: this was the symbol of the new kind of life he was to embrace. He was presented with a crown, and he trampled upon it. The Hierophanta held the sacred knife over his head; the initiated, who feigned to be struck with it, fell, as if he were dead; after which he appeared to regenerate.

There was (amidst all the shameful customs, trifling ceremonies, and ridiculous doctrines, which the people and priests followed, in honour of some imaginary gods, who were despised and detested by the sages) a pure religion, which consisted in acknowledging the existence of a supreme God, his providence and justice.

VOLTAIRE.

A GENTLEMAN who travelled into Spain, recites an extraordinary epitaph on the King of Spain’s Preceptor, which he had seen himself at Saragossa; and which, for extravagance of encomium (and indeed for impiety) has rarely been equalled.—“Here lies John Cabeca, Preceptor of my Lord the King. When he is admitted to the choir of angels (whose society he will embellish, and where he will distinguish himself by his powers of song) God will say to the angels, “Cease, ye calves! and let me hear John Cabeca, the Preceptor of my Lord the King.”

DIED,

Lately at Norwich, Connecticut, Mr. Samuel Brown, aged 90. He was the first owner of a chaise in Norwich, and was prosecuted under the Blue Laws, and fined for breaking the Sabbath by riding in his carriage on a Sunday, to attend public worship.

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